Evelyn Eischen  
Narrator

Deborah Locke  
Interviewer

New Ulm, Minnesota  
August 10, 2011

AL = Aimee LaBree  
Minnesota Historical Society

DL = Deborah Locke  
Minnesota Historical Society

EE = Evelyn Eischen

MI = Mike Eischen (Evelyn’s son)

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on August 10, 2011 in New Ulm, Minnesota. Interviewee: Evelyn Eischen. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Evelyn, could you spell your first and last names for us?
EE: E-V-E-L-Y-N  E-I-S-C-H-E-N.

DL: What is your date of birth?
EE: April 21, 1930.

DL: Who were your parents?
EE: Burt Windschitl and Mary Windschitl; (spelled by EE)

DL: And your grandparents on both sides?
EE: My grandparents were Mike and Rosa Holm and Frank and Anna Windschitl.

DL: How many siblings do you have?
EE: I had three, but my sister died a couple years ago. I have a brother and a sister and myself. And then I had a brother that died when he was an infant; his name was Joseph.

DL: How long have you lived here?

EE: All my life.

DL: What is your heritage?

ME: You mean, how she’s related to this?

DL: Some people are German-American…

ME: Oh, okay.

EE: Well, American, I suppose. I was born in this country and lived here all my life.

DL: Your European relatives; where were most of those from?

EE: I think everybody was from Germany. I know Rosa Holm, she came over from Germany. Mike was born here, Mike Holm, my grandpa, was born in this country, but he spoke German also, besides English.

ME: It was Rose that wouldn’t talk English.

EE: (laughing) I know; Rosa didn’t want to talk English. Frank and Anna Windschitl, my other grandparents, were from Germany.

DL: Where did you go to school?

EE: I went to school at Comfrey High School and went to {an elementary} school a few miles from my home, District 42.

ME: Mulligan Township.

EE: Mulligan Township; correct.

DL: What’s the first news story you remember from your childhood.

EE: News story?

DL: Yes, of events beyond New Ulm. National or international.

ME: World War II?
EE: Probably, yes, World War II, I suppose. My dad was in World War I as a soldier. I really can’t tell you what the first news was.

DL: If you don’t remember, that’s fine. Which relative had the most influence on you?

EE: Oh, probably my mother and dad.

DL: What did you learn about the family history while you were growing up? Who talked about it?

EE: Oh, my mother talked about it a lot.

DL: Do you remember any of the things she said?

EE: She talked about her mom and dad, and about her mother, Rosa. She came from Germany when she was very young, and didn’t really get any schooling here, couldn’t write English and couldn’t speak English. She always felt sorry for her mother. But Rosa got along fine. When she married Mike Holm, he taught her English and also taught her how to write, so they were fine that way.

DL: You must speak German, then.

EE: I can understand German, and also, if I have to, I can speak German, but when I was young, in order to communicate with my grandparents, I did speak German. Grandma always said, “Now, come on! You can do it,” she’d say, and I did— I was able to talk German.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War during your growing up years?

EE: Yes, yes I did. My grandfather talked about it a lot.

DL: What do you remember him saying about it?

EE: Well, he was very fearful of the Indians, I remember that. He also told about how his father and his mother picked up this little boy that was his father’s sister’s son. They picked up that little boy after {his parents} were killed by the Indians. The parents were the Roesers; George and Barbara. They were the father and mother of this boy that they raised, or brought up. That boy was my great-grandfather, John Holm. They raised that boy, they didn’t have any children when they picked him up, and they took care of him for many years. I don’t know when he left home. Grandpa didn’t know, because Grandpa was the youngest child in that family, Grandpa Mike.

DL: So Mike and Rosa raised him? How old was the little boy when they found him?

EE: No, it wasn’t Mike and Rosa that raised him, it was the father of Mike, and his name was John. John’s wife was Katherine. See, that’s where I always get mixed up.
John and Katherine. They were my great grandpa and grandma.

DL: The little boy was the child of George and Barbara, and they had been killed.

EE: That’s correct. That lady here at the {Brown County Historical Society} library, she said that this little boy’s name was actually George, but they must have changed it to John, because she has his obituary.

ME: They changed the name.

DL: They named him after his second father, the one who actually raised him, who was also named George?

EE: George was actually his uncle, because John Holm was the brother of Barbara Roeser.

DL: I wonder why that little child was spared.

EE: I don’t know.

ME: I don’t know.

DL: Did you ever hear any stories about why they spared that little boy?

EE: No. They {the Dakota} hit him. They hit him and I think they thought they had killed him, but they just knocked him out. That’s kind of the story Grandpa told. I have to go by what my Grandpa Mike told.

DL: So according to this book, the little guy was only 18 months old; that’s barely talking. He was left for dead and rescued by your great grandparents, who were also his uncle and aunt.

EE: Right. That’s correct.

ME: And then there’s another story- I don’t know if it was a Leavenworth rescue party or one of the rescue parties that found him and they took him back to New Ulm.

DL: So this little guy grows up and has the name John. Did John and Katherine have other children?

EE: Yes, they did. They had, let’s see here, they had a Barbara- their first child was a girl and they named her Barbara; they named her after the lady that was killed, which would have been the aunt. And then they had Joseph and they had Lizzie and my grandfather, Mike.

DL: Mike was the youngest?
EE: Mike was the youngest; that was my grandfather. He was actually 13 years younger than John Roeser- I don’t know how.

ME: Grandma always said Razor.

EE: They said Razor, they pronounced it Razor.

DL: Did they change, little John’s last name too?

EE: No. Because his obituary – she {librarian} read it to me – listed Roeser.

DL: Do you know if they raised that little boy to know what happened to his parents?

EE: I imagine they did tell him.

DL: Was he the only survivor then, from that group?

EE: Well, yes. The story Grandfather told was that they got killed. They took horses and a wagon and they left home and then they were killed on the way. This little boy was laying in the ditch and Great-grandpa and Great-grandma came along a little while later and picked up the little boy. But the museum has a different story about that.

DL: What is the museum story?

EE: They are saying that they found him in, like a- oh, where they took these children here in New Ulm someplace in a building where they took the other children, and he was trying to drink water out of a bucket and that’s where Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother picked him up.

ME: According to this story.

EE: Grandpa told the other story.

ME: {Referencing book} In says in here they found him- I don’t know- trying to get water out of a bucket. You know, the rescue party.

DL: Well, it’s her family story that matters the most now.

ME: That’s true.

DL: So this couple came across the little boy and adopted him. Did they ever talk about what happened to his parents?

EE: I don’t know.
DL: Did they ever find his parents? Who found them? Were they in the wagon?

EE: I don’t know. That I don’t know because my grandfather, I supposed he didn’t know either. And then I asked a lady here from the museum if there were any Roesers left, and she said there was a man who was trying to find where they’re buried.

DL: That was my next question: where were they buried?

EE: He can’t find any graves, and he lives here in New Ulm, or lives in this area. And where this all happened was at Milford.

DL: A lot of bad things happened at Milford.

EE: Yes, I noticed. I read one of those books before and it said I don’t know how many people were killed.

ME: ... pretty much all wiped out.

DL: You mentioned that your grandfather was fearful of Indians. Would you say he was afraid of Indians from that time forward, for the rest of his life?

EE: I would say yes.

DL: He never quite recovered from that.

EE: No. He heard the stories from his parents.

DL: Were you ever afraid?

EE: To some extent, yes.

DL: How about today?

EE: I don’t know, I guess so.

DL: That’s interesting, that fear was handed from generation to generation.

EE: Oh, yes. I try to tell myself all this is over with and that sort of thing, but yes, to some extent I guess I am {still afraid of Indians}.

DL: It’s a very difficult history on both sides.

EE: Yes it is.

DL: That’s a very dramatic story you told us. So I was wondering, was there anything else that you heard from your grandparents from that time?
EE: No, not really. But I can hear my grandfather’s voice when he told about this, and he was very serious. Whether he had the whole story straight, I don’t know, but that’s the story he told. And he didn’t tell it only once; he said it several times, because to some extent it seemed like it bothered him. And I think it did.

ME: Didn’t you say he said it in German, “Indiana”? When he got serious she always said his eyes would kind of…

EE: He told the story in English, but then he called them in German: “Indiana.”

ME: It really isn’t hate or anything; it’s just fear. It must have really scared the people back then.

DL: Oh sure; with good reason.

ME: Actually, I always used to love going to the Lower Sioux. They used to have an art show and we’d talk business. They were artists and I wasn’t, and we talked where they were selling their stuff and everything, and we got along real good. So it (fear) doesn’t really stay forever.

DL: Your property, the homestead that that family was on, where the parents were killed, was that handed down in the family? Does somebody still own it that is related?

EE: I don’t know. Grandpa said that his great-grandparents, John and Katherine, had no children. They picked up the little boy and they had the horse and wagon, they had it loaded down, and they left and homesteaded by Springfield, Minnesota. They left Milford, and Grandpa said they didn’t want anything more to do with Milford.

DL: They left and never came back?

EE: That’s what he says. They homesteaded on a farm, 160 acres east of Springfield. Then my Grandpa Mike and Rosa, they inherited that farm and they lived there. And so they became residents of the Springfield area.

DL: I wonder if they came upon this couple that had been killed, if they didn’t just bury them immediately.

EE: That’s what somebody had mentioned to Mike; it’s possible that they did put up a marker, but it deteriorated or something; I don’t know. But the graves, my grandparents, the great-grandparents, their graves are in Leavenworth. They must have went to church at Leavenworth. The church is older than Springfield.

DL: Now, what is the story of Leavenworth? What do you remember hearing about that?
EE: Actually not that much. Nobody ever mentioned anything about Leavenworth. But that was hit hard too.

DL: I think a group from Leavenworth went around rescuing people. Have you ever been to Mankato, to the execution site?

EE: No.

DL: Did your grandparents ever talk about that?

EE: Nope. Grandpa never said a thing about that.

DL: What is your opinion of the war?

EE: Well, I feel very sad that it happened, and I suppose that’s about it. It makes me sad.

DL: What do you think caused it?

EE: I don’t know. I suppose there’s two sides to every story, and possibly some people didn’t treat Indians the way they should have. And it’s too bad, but they shouldn’t have taken it out on children and innocent people. If there were any way {to resolve differences}, they should have tried to find a different way.

DL: Do you have any opinion of what the treaties were, or their importance?

EE: No.

DL: Is it a good idea to commemorate, or remember the events from the mid 1800’s?

EE: Yes, I guess it is. I guess people should not be forgotten. That’s why I’m here. I wasn’t going to come, but then I started to think about my relatives; even if I didn’t know them, I started to feel really sorry for them and felt I owed them that much, to come here and tell their story; what I know.

DL: Well, that took courage and we’re very glad that you did. Thank you for doing that. What’s the best way to commemorate these events from back then?

EE: Oh, probably in books. I like the markers they put up. I think there’s one in Milford with their names. I think that’s very nice, and I think it’s very good.

DL: Many of the Dakota suffered terribly after the war. They weren’t involved with war, but they suffered; they were kicked out of the state; many of them died of starvation, even though their leaders said they were not participating in war. So they suffered too. You mentioned the horrific suffering of the non-Dakota people, the farmers; but of course, some innocent Dakota died as well.
EE: Yes.

DL: Did anybody win that war?

EE: I don’t know.

ME: If you figure out the lies, I don’t think so.

DL: What is your opinion?

EE: I’d say no. Nobody did win the war. Just like all this here, it really didn’t solve any problems.

DL: What is it about human nature that we can’t let go of what has happened to us? I have a friend who told me that he was in Denmark and some Danish people were angry with the Swedes because the Swedes attacked them centuries earlier. What is it about human nature that we keep remembering these things; perhaps they keep eliciting certain sentiments and sadness. What is it about that that we don’t want to let go of?

EE: Well, we don’t want to let go of our families and I think this is family. She was my great aunt, this lady, Barbara, and I often wonder what she looked like and if she looked like the other Holms, or if she looked different. And I never got to know her son and I wonder, too, how he looked.

DL: You have pictures here. Can you tell us who’s in the picture?

EE: That’s my grandfather and Grandma. He is the son of the man that picked up that little boy.

DL: Do you have any pictures of that little boy; the new John?

EE: No. I really wish I did. I went through pictures that my mother had. I just really tried to find a picture of him and I could not find anything. This is all my mother’s writings and things she saved, and Mike put it in a nice folder for me. That prayer book that my mother wrote all the information in, and then I copied it all down here; the dates.

DL: Is that in German?

ME: No, I think it’s English. Just in the beginning, they just listed all the family.

EE: Is it German?

ME: No.

EE: Because I didn’t even look. And then here she’s got, this is Mom’s dad.
DL: (Reading) Died August 9th; that would have been yesterday- but in 1962.

EE: I copied this all down yesterday. He was buried in Leavenworth. I always put a bouquet of flowers on that grave.

DL: He fell from a tree.

EE: Yes.

DL: A ladder up against a tree.

EE: What was he- 88 or 89, and he climbed up on a ladder to cut the branch off a tree.

Male: Broke his hip.

EE: Oh, poor Grandpa, and he fell.

DL: Here he wrote the day he was married, May 23, 1899.

EE: Yes.

DL: Look at this little treasure.

EE: That was my mother’s.

DL: I wonder how often she read this.

EE: That book has seen better times. But we’re thankful to have it.

DL: It’s marvelous that you still have it.

EE: We went and looked all over the shelves and I said to Mike, “I know there’s something my mom wrote up.”

DL: Are you Mike?

ME: Yes.

DL: Are you a namesake for one of these people whose names....

EE: Well, he is. And then his Grandpa Eischen was Mike too.

Mike: Yes, I could be {named after} either one.

DL: You were named after Mike, your great-great grandfather?
ME: Well, it would be probably my grandfather on the Eischen side; he was Mike.

EE: You were named after Grandpa Mike Eischen.

DL: She would know.

EE: He was the father of Mike’s dad, my husband.

DL: Show us something else from here; anything of interest in this package?

EE: Well, this is what I used and copied down.

DL: From the Bible?

ME: No, that was in…

EE: No, that was someplace else.

ME: When Mike died, they kept a book and everybody’s signature is in it, and this was written at the beginning of the book. I don’t know if Grandma or one of the girls wrote that down. But it lists the family, and then Barbara and George are listed on there too. That’s how we knew there was a connection.

EE: And here was, “parents of Joseph, George and Barbara.” See, here they call Joseph, George Jr. John Roeser, born 1860, that’s the little boy.

DL: I wonder why they didn’t just let him keep his name. He was named for his father, and it was a relative.

ME: Something about back then they changed the names….

EE: Right. If the firstborn was a son, he got the dad’s name.

DL: That was just the tradition.

Mike: Yes. You remembered if it was George the First, or George the Second.

EE: Yes.

DL: And what were their names again, this couple {referencing picture}?

EE: Mike and Rosa. Rosa came over from Germany.

ME: Here were the two that were at the Battle of New Ulm, John Sr., and John Jr.
DL: {Holding wedding photo} It’s their wedding day and they’re dressed in dark clothes like they’re in mourning. This was before women started wearing white for their weddings.

EE: But she seems to have a white veil on.

DL: She does have a white veil. And they don’t look particularly happy, either. Perhaps it was a difficult day. (laughter) But they’re all dressed up; he’s wearing a corsage and she looks thoughtful. Is there anything you want to add to our interview? It’s up to you; anything I missed that you should mention?

EE: No, I don’t think so.

ME: I was just going to say, she found that {the child renamed John} when he died, he was buried in Springfield.

EE: If I would have had a little more time, I would have tried to find {George/John’s} grave because it’s probably at the Catholic cemetery. I assumed they were Catholic; I don’t know- being that Grandpa and Grandma were.

DL: That would be quite a find, to find that gravestone.

Mike: It would be nice, if you could still read it.

DL: Thank you so much for your time.

DL: We’re going to do a quick addendum to our interview, and this is another story that Evelyn wanted to mention before we leave for the day. So Evelyn, you were talking about another couple and something that happened with them, concerning the Dakota people.

EE: It was John and Katherine Holm; they were my great grandparents. John was a brother to Barbara Roeser, and they were told by an Indian to stay in their house and they would not be hurt.

DL: During the attacks…

EE: Right. They had a friend, he was a friend of theirs, or they had gotten along with.

DL: So they were spared. Where was their homestead; where was their home?

EE: I don’t know. We don’t know any of that. But they are trying here at the museum to find the homes of them and the Roesers.
DL: They must have had a relationship with the Dakota people, and one of them came and said: But you stay inside and you'll be fine. And that's what happened. I wonder what relationship they had, and I wonder if they met for food, or if they exchanged food, or …

EE: Or if they helped each other in some way; I don't know. That part, Grandpa told that also, but he just had that one sentence; that's all he told about that. I suppose he didn't know any more about it.

DL: Thank you again.